siege on President Yasir Arafat has since been lifted. We consider it a positive step in the direction of peace.

Fraudulent activities of agencies in procuring passports visas

5325. SHRIMATI S.G. INDIRA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are aware of increasing fraudulent activities by many agencies in procuring passports/visas and also duping of innocent victims; and

(b) if so, whether any steps have been taken to prevent such activities?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI OMAR ABDULLAH): (a) Yes, Sir. From time to time, representations are received regarding activities of unscrupulous travel agencies in procuring passports and visas on false personal particulars.

(b) Passports are normally issued within five weeks provided clear police verification report has been received and the application is complete in all respects. Short validity passports of an urgent nature can be issued on the basis of a verification certificate issued by an officer not below the rank of Deputy Secretary to the Government of India. Some of the Passport Offices have been authorized to issue passports on police report overdue basis if the police report is not received within 4 weeks. In cases, where a negative police report is received subsequent to issue of the passport, the applicants are contacted for clarification and where necessary their passports are revoked/impounded.

In August 2000, the Government had laid down more strict criteria for recognition of travel agencies authorised to submit passport application forms at the passport offices. The State police authorities have also been advised to watch the activities of unscrupulous travel agencies.

Anti-India activities of extremists from neighbouring countries

5326. SHRI PARMESHWAR KUMAR AGARWALLA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether some extremists are operating against India from neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Pakistan, Malaysia, Philippines and Bangladesh;